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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 000017

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SUBJECT: Vietnam's Impressions of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat in Danang

CLASSIFIED BY: Virginia Palmer, Deputy Chief of Mission; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The first major ASEAN meeting of Vietnam's chairmanship, an informal foreign ministers retreat, focused primarily on internal efforts to implement ASEAN's new charter and on aspirations to build an ASEAN Community by 2015, according to officials from the MFA's ASEAN Department. ASEAN's external relations were a secondary, but important subject, with agreement that ASEAN should remain at the core of any emerging Asian architecture. Burma was not an agenda item -- in keeping with the nature of the retreat, there was no formal agenda -- but the Burmese Foreign Minister was asked to report on preparations for the 2010 elections, which he said were tentatively planned May 27-28. Our MFA contacts gave no indication that ASEAN's human rights body was discussed. Participants endorsed broadening external contacts for the ADMM, with a "+8" arrangement emerging as the most likely grouping. Vietnam continues to press for senior U.S. participation in ASEAN events, including the Secretary's attendance at a series of ASEAN Dialogue Partner, ARF, and Lower Mekong Initiative meetings July 22-24, as well as a October 29-31 Leaders Summit, which Vietnam dearly wants the President to attend. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Vietnam kicked off its 2010 ASEAN chairmanship with a low-key meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers January 13-14 in Danang. According to the Director of the Political and Security Division within the MFA's ASEAN Department, Duong Tri Hien, the FM retreat also involved two of ASEAN's four ministerial-level committees, one dealing with political and security affairs, the other dealing with overall coordination. (The economic and cultural/social committees did not meet.) The political/ security committee, Hien said, built on discussions held last year in Phuket and focused on boosting regional initiatives to combat human trafficking, efforts to make the Declaration of Conduct in the South China Sea more robust, and prospects for a status-of-forces agreement in connection with regional disaster relief exercises. Hien characterized deliberations on all these issues as amicable but still preliminary. The ministers also established an ASEAN Connectivity Task Force, which will concentrate on supporting ASEAN's larger goal to build an ASEAN Community by 2015 by strengthening "hard" links within the region, such as maritime shipping and shared energy grids, as well as by encouraging "soft" links, such as cultural exchanges and more advanced and widely shared information technology.

¶3. (C) As for the retreat itself, Hien said that discussions focused primarily on setting priorities for 2010, including in

particular efforts to accelerate the implementation of ASEAN's December 2008 Charter. The most significant achievement in this regard was an agreement to finalize work on a dispute-resolution mechanism in time for the April ASEAN leaders summit, Hien said. Ministers also discussed ASEAN's external relations and affirmed that any discussion of regional architecture must have ASEAN as its core. There was little discussion of ASEAN "+" mechanisms, a reflection, Hien claimed, of the fact that ASEAN is satisfied with current arrangements.

Wish List for U.S. Participation in 2010

14. (SBU) The ministers did, however, discuss the second ASEAN-U.S. Summit, agreeing that the event should be held in Hanoi, most appropriately in connection with the ASEAN summit planned for the end of October (October 29-31). Hien conceded it might be difficult for the President to attend a late October summit, coming immediately before the U.S. mid-term elections, and he said that there was still much to discuss, both internally and with the United States, before formal invitations could be extended. He echoed the line given by nearly all GVN officials that whatever the date, Vietnam should host the summit in Vietnam. Hien added that ASEAN's other dialogue partners have already committed to attending

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meetings in Hanoi connected with the October summit.

15. (SBU) In a separate discussion, the MFA's Deputy DG for ASEAN Affairs Vu Ho outlined plans for the 43rd ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM), as well as related post-ministerial meetings, including the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum ministerials and the Lower Mekong Initiative. He said that the dates were not confirmed, but stressed that none of the ASEAN members or dialogue partners had voiced objections and absent any pushback, the schedule would go forward as planned. As currently scheduled, the meetings would be as follows, with the Secretary ideally participating July 22-24.

July 16-18	ASEAN SOM meetings
July 18	ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism Working Group
July 19	ASEAN FMs arrive
July 20	AMM
July 21	ASEAN+3 SOM and FM meetings EAS FM Consultations
July 22	PMCs: +1s with China, ROK, Japan, Australia, India, New Zealand, Canada, Russia, U.S., EU
July 23	17th ARF retreat and plenary Closing ceremony for AMM and related meetings Press conference by ASEAN Chair
July 24	Lower Mekong Initiative

ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting

¶6. (C) In addition to the AMM and Leaders Summit, our MFA contacts confirmed that Secretary Gates would also be invited as a dialogue partner to attend the ASEAN Defense Ministerial Meeting, which would likely take place immediately prior to the October summit. On the ADMM, Hien reported that there was general agreement at the FM retreat that there should be a "+" mechanism, but the ministers differed slightly on how it should be structured. Vietnam's view was that it should be a "+10" arrangement, others argued for smaller groupings, though nobody envisioned moving directly to "+1" discussions. DDG Vu Ho, who led a joint MFA/MOD delegation to discuss the ADMM the week after the retreat, reported that there was now an unofficial consensus that the ADMM should begin this year with a "+8" arrangement (all ten dialogue partners, minus Canada and the EU, which means: ASEAN plus China, ROK, Japan, Australia, India, New Zealand, Russia, and U.S.); the defense ministers themselves can decide on any future configurations, he added, joking that by that point he would be too exhausted to care. Vu Ho said that a date for the ADMM has not been set but would most likely take place shortly before the ASEAN summit in late October.

Burma

¶7. (C) Both DDG Vu Ho and Hien affirmed that Burma was discussed at the FM retreat, though not in great detail. According to Hien,

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FM Pham Gia Khiem, as the host, invited his Burmese counterpart Nhan Win to brief the group. Nhan Win reported that preparations were underway for Burma's 2010 elections, which he said his government aims to conduct May 27-28. Nhan Win claimed that Burma's relations with the outside world were "improving." Neither Vu Ho nor Hien would characterize the discussions on Burma, but gave the impression that the FMs did not push the issue particularly hard. (Note: Other ASEAN members gave a slightly different impression. Singapore Ambassador Simon Wong, for example, told the Ambassador the day after the retreat, that some FMs reportedly agreed during a "private" meeting that at a minimum the Burmese generals needed to allow Aung San Suu Kyi to meet with the "uncles." End note.) In both meetings, Deputy PolCouns emphasized the need for Burma's 2010 elections to be fair and transparent, stressing that this would be impossible as long as ASSK remained in prison. He encouraged both Hien and Vu Ho to use Vietnam's leverage with Burma to, in the short run, permit ASSK to meet with the NLD leadership in full, along with representatives of national minority groups.
Michalak